

Dr. Charles Coniaris

Q: Charlie Conairis in reference to remembering the Greeks in Newark. Commonly called Tyke (sp?). Tyke, where did your family come from in Greece, and what prompted them to come to America?

A: My mother came from Archavia (sp?) to Tonavlonguardia, (sp?) which is in the Felopoinuses (sp?) and my father also came from the same area in the Felopoinuses. My father came here, as most of his generation, to make enough money to send back so he could marry his sisters. My mother came here as a young girl of about 14 years old to meet her father who was here and her two sisters who were here, and to find a husband for her in America.

Q: OK. When did they arrive in the United States? What year, and if you came with them how old were you, and when did you come?

A: My father came here about 1918 after having served in the Greek Army. He became a citizen in 1925, my mother came here about 1916 or 1918 at age 14.

Q: Originally, what point of entry in the United States, state, city, or town, did they come into the country?

A: They both came in through Ellis Island, in New York, as did most of the Greeks.

Q: When did they settle in Newark, and in what part of Newark?

A: My father came to Newark in 1927. Let me back off. My father and mother got married in 1922; they were living in Morristown. They came to Newark in 1927 and settled on West Market Street in Newark.

Q: Did you attend school in Newark? And if you did, what schools and where did you graduate from?

A: I went to Warren Street School, Central Avenue School, Robert treat (sp?) School, and graduated high school from Berringer (sp?) High School.

Q: What year did you graduate from Berringer?

A: 1943. January of 1943, Berringer.

Q: Did you belong to any Greek, or any American organizations? And if you did, which ones did you belong to?

A: I was a member of the YMCA, I belonged to the Greek school in those days, Boy Scouts of America, we had a troop called Troop 19, met in downtown Newark, and our group was all Greek boys, which was pretty rare in those days.

Q: To what church did you belong to in Newark?

A: I belonged to St. Dimitri's (sp?) Church when it was located on New Street in Newark.

Q: Did your family have a business in Newark, and if they did,

what type? If they didn't own a business, what type of work or profession were they involved in?

A: My father had a high cleaning business in the public service terminal in downtown Newark on Broad Street. He was there for about 20 years until his retirement.

Q: When did you establish your business, and who was the original owner? Did you work for any Greek Americans in business, did you hire Greek Americans in your business? Elaborate Nathan.

A: I graduated optometry school in Chicago, Illinois, 1949 and upon returning back to Newark I opened up my own office on West Market Street in 1949, to practice the profession of optometry.

Q: Give some background about your life growing up in Newark, and when did you marry, how did you meet your wife, and how many children do you have? In other words, give me some background about your family.

A: Most of my generation, we grew up around West Market Street, Warren Street, Academy Street, Summit Place area. We had our own groups, we couldn't travel too far from our neighborhood. I think we were allowed, from Summit Place we couldn't go beyond West Market Street on one side, and New Street on the other side. We could never go past downtown

Newark and we could never go above Jones Street, or Clifton Avenue. We used to sneak out though and go there like anyone else. We hung around with the boy scouts. Before that we played a lot of games, like everyone knows, kicking the can, hide and seek, ring or leave your Johnny on a pony, some of those games were nice because we would allow the girls to play with us. At age 13 that's pretty good. After that, by the time I was 13 years old, things were rough during the depression, and I went to work for Mr. Dudmoursiss (sp?) who had the Greek store down on Plain Street. And I used to deliver newspapers, Greek newspapers after school for three years. I used to go to work about 3:30 in the afternoon, work until about 6:30 every night, seven days a week, for which Mr. Dudmoursiss gave me \$3.00 cash. I did that for three years, and for the \$3.00, I used to go down to the Market and Broad radio music store (inaudible) and I bought my mother a refrigerator, and it cost me \$3.00 a week for three years to pay it off. After that, we went through high school, and after that I went to the service. I was in the service for about 32 months. I was in the Army Air force.

Q: What year was that in the service?

A: I went into the service August of 1943 until March of 1946,

and when I was released from the service, I went to college in Chicago, Illinois, and got my degree as an optometrist. I opened my office in 1949, I enjoyed myself for a few years, dated many girls, quite a few Greek girls, knowing that some day I probably would marry one. And then one time at St. Nicholas Church -- at St. Constantine Church, I was there at a dance, and within two weeks I had to go to a formal and I needed a date, and I didn't have one, so I spotted Betty Catholis (sp?) at the time, and I asked her if she would mind going to a formal affair with me in two weeks. That was around April of 1953, April or May. She consented to go, and we went to the affair, and then we came to the -- we got to the point of getting married, and I wanted to get married as soon as possible because I couldn't afford dating her at the time. And I must say this as a joke, but in all sincerity, it happened. We were going together for quite a while, and when we decided to get married, her mother wanted us to get married that (inaudible). She wanted us to get married around October or November, or later, because they needed time. You couldn't get married in October, supposedly it was a bad luck month, November was Thanksgiving, so they tried to delay the wedding. This was around May when we decided to get married. We only went together for about six weeks or so.

So, one day when she was talking about wedding arrangements, I told her, I says, "You better get married sooner than the end of the year, because otherwise, you'll be carrying your grandchild down the aisle." It's a true story. Anyhow, they consented and we finally got married in August of 1953, August 30th, 1953. And I thought it was pretty good the way it was done. Great mother-in-law, great mother-in-law.

Q: Now, you had a brother who was a doctor also?

A: My older brother John became a pharmacist first because he couldn't get into medical school, then he did get into medical school, finally after trying for five years, and he graduated from Floral Fifth Avenue (sp?) Hospital in 1953. Scratch that, about 1951 he graduated medical school, at which time he was a (inaudible) to go into the service in the '40s during the war, they wouldn't take him, he was (inaudible). But as soon as he got his M.D. degree, and the Korean War broke out, they drafted him as a doctor. So he served about 30 months in the service as a doctor, and he saw service in Korea. My brother Andy graduated pharmacy school in 1951 and he had his own drugstore for 30 years and did very well, very successful. My sister Vinnie Anicia (sp?) graduated Floral Fifth Avenue Nursing School and she was a registered nurse. And at one time, not knowing what

she wanted to do, she wound up going to Saudi Arabia for the Aramco company, as a nurse out there and she (break in tape) 20 years. She got married out there. Finally, she and her husband retired, they're back in the states now and they live in New Mexico. So I got married in 1953, and we have three children: Cynthia, Dean, and John, who are now married and doing very well.

Q: And you're a grandfather right?

A: A grandfather four times.

Q: Great. Now your brother John, who is the Doctor, did he share an office with Dr. Antonias (sp?) or was he associated or?

A: My brother John got out of medical school and came back from the service. He was an associate of Dr. Antonias for about 15 years, 15, 16 years. As time progressed and things were changing, he wound up leaving Dr. Antonia, opened up his own office in Summit. He was there about three years, and then sickness caught up to him and he passed away at the age of 54.

Q: Next question.

A: I might add, that when John was a doctor, he was a chief in the Cardiology department at St. Michael's hospital in Newark, New Jersey.

Q: Did anyone help you -- excuse me, not you -- did any members of your family, when they first arrived in America -- in other words, did well to or...

A: From what I understand, my father came here, he came off the boat, and went on his own from the very first day. He went to New York City, was a dishwasher, and he used to tell the story that after two weeks there they threw him out because he was scratching his nose. Then he came to New Jersey and he did everything on his own. He couldn't read, write, or speak English, but in his lifetime, he learned on his own to read, write, and speak it fluently.

Q: That's great. Like many of the --

A: Like most of his friends did. Like most of the people that were from we're familiar with in New Jersey.

Q: You already said a lot of your life surrounded around the Greek-American community. Were you involved in other aspects of community life, in the larger Newark community? In other words, outside the Greek area?

A: Many years ago, when I first came out of optometry school, I was a member of the YMCA and I was a member of the exchange club, which was a club, and their purpose was to help young people. I also became a member of a masons, I've been a mason for approximately 48 years now. I became a HEPA (sp?)

in 1946, I was initiated in Chicago because I was going to school there at the time. So in 1946, I became an HEPA at age 21 I believe, and right now I've been inactive. I received my 50-year pin, I've been active, I have been, for 53 years. They joke about my down at the HEPA meeting, they say I'm the oldest continuous HEPA in the Uricha (sp?) Lodge aside from Bill Chirgotis and Teddy Bravakis. Icon number three. I'm the old guy.

Q: OK. That's good. OK now, is there anything else you want to tell us about life in Newark, or what it was like as a teenager? I know you touched on a lot of things, but what fond memories do you have about the neighborhood Newark?

A: I guess people in my generation are going to say the same things I'm going to say. We always abided by our family's wishes, we stuck with each other, as far as Greeks were concerned, we messed around a lot, but you never did any harm or touched a Greek girl where you would embarrass yourself or her, I'm sure most everyone felt like that. Growing up during the Depression was very difficult, but then again, I was in an environment where everybody was in the same position so I didn't know what a depression was, I didn't know what being poor was because we always managed to eat something. So, many years later they tell you about the

Depression and the good old days. I must say this: as far as I'm concerned today, they were not the good old days. You didn't have anything to eat, you had one pair of stockings, one pair of shoes, one shirt, your stockings had holes in them, they were mended, you got blisters on your feet. So you froze in the winter, sweated in the summer, there was no air conditioning. So, the so called good old days are not so good compared to today, however, I think it toughened us up and made us stronger than the average person. I must bring to mind, that during Lent, we instepsied (sp?) which means we refrained from all milk products, meat products, anything that had blood for 40 days, and we stuck with it. At which time, we were forced to eat nothing but beans, carrots, black-eyed beans, foscolotta (sp?) soup, anything that didn't have any blood. I believe that that toughness for those 40 days strengthened our system, our immune system, that's why so many of us at this age -- I will be 45 next week -- at this age, we still are in very good health and have very few problems with keeping up with life. I think as rough as it was, it toughened us up. It really was an experience. I can go on and on but I'm sure that everyone else that was in my position has told the same story. The big thing was honesty, integrity, respect for each other, as you hear all

the time, initiative, get things done, do it right, same as everyone else. And that's why to this day, most of us of my generation are still very close friends.

Q: Tell me about your Greek School experience, how was that? Greek School.

A: Greek School like everybody else. Our Greek School was Mr. Canambrero (sp?). That was at St. Dimitri's school in Newark on New Street. We used to go to Greek plays, I can't believe it that sometimes we would memorize Greek plays 10, 15 pages long, memorize it in Greek. We never made a mistake when we had to perform. And the amazing thing is, a lot of the things we said, the Greek words we used, we didn't even know what they meant. It's like reading the bible today, you hear it, but with the Cathararis (sp?) in Greek, you have no idea what they're talking about. Somehow we managed to memorize these things, and they really prepared us for the future where we could use this in our everyday living, and business, and everything that we do. It taught us how to be progressive in things, put things in order.

Q: You went to Greek school every day?

A: We used to go to Greek school every day after school, we had to run from Warren Street School, which was on West Market

Street, run all the way down to St. Dimitri's school to be there by 3:30. We had about 15 minutes to get there. Of course, on the way many times, we'd stop to play shooters, or marbles, and go in with our hands dirty. The Greek school teacher would see us, Mr. Carandrero (sp?) or Upanicholi (sp?), the priest, the first thing they'd do and look at our hands and if they saw our knuckles were dirty, that's why we were late. So we used to get the ruler up on the head, or hit us in the head, capital punishment they call it today. We used to get hit because of that. Greek school was a lot of fun, we got to meet our friends. Until this day, we still talk about it, the things we did. It taught us a lot. At the time, of course, like anyone else, we hated going there, we hated learning Greek, we hated learning to write it, but in effect, it prepared us for what we are today. We used to go to American school, and they used to teach us Ancient Greek mythology and we used to know more than the teachers, we used to tell them what Greek Mythology was because we learned it in Greek school. But I must say that because of the Greek school, the Greek background I had, it helped me when I opened up my office, because without the Greek population back in those days, I never would have made a success out of optometry. I owe it all to the Greek people. And I learned that from Dr.

Antonias, who many times confided in me to. To get started, you're going to have to work with the Greek people. Because that's the only ones that know you. I listened to the man, he made a lot of sense.

Q: Now your office is located right next to his?

A: I was located a block below Dr. Antonias, and then later on I moved right upstairs from his office, and I stayed there about 10 years. I guess that's about it, unless there's anything else.

Q: Who were your closest friends when you were growing up as a teenager? I know you had many friends, but --

A: I would say my closest friends were Angela Polockus (sp?), Pete Michalars (sp?), Charlie Kostakis (sp?), I'm trying to think of Greek boys, Pete Kapsamalus (sp?), we were very friendly, my cousin Dr. Poulus (sp?), we were very close, but today most of these people have gone their way. They've moved away from the area, but until this day, people I did know in those days, Mike Pascus (sp?), Pete Trovonis (sp?), Jimmy Katromanus (sp?), Jimmy Patene (sp?), to name a few, Harry Menarichus (sp?), we still see each other and reminisce the old days every time we go down to the (inaudible) post 440 every afternoon, and we just talk about the good old days. There's a lot more people I could

mention but the names don't come to mind right now.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add on to the interview? Anything of importance, or?

A: Not really Pete.

Q: What do you think about this project though?

A: I think it's a great thing. I think it will expose the Greek people to the rest of the community, it will show how hardships were overcome by our parents, and how they made something of themselves, and in a sense, if you were wise enough, you carried on those traditions with your children. I must say, I was fortunate; I had three children married. It seems like everything that was taught to me by my mother and father and my mother Lunkefalu (sp?) has been passed down to my children and I have no regrets. Life has been good to me, having seen all my children happily married, I have grandchildren. I have no complaints about life; it was good to me. I've seen everything. Thank you.

Q: Great, that's great.

End - Dr. Charles Coniaris